

■ MAKING THE MOST OF TRADE MISSIONS

ADVICE FROM WOMEN WHO'VE BEEN THERE (AND BACK)

by Erin Butler

U.S. Commercial Service

Ilene Robinson just returned from Africa. And now, she's ready to make some deals.

Robinson was part of a delegation of U.S. businesswomen that recently accompanied Commerce Department Assistant Secretary and Director General Maria Cino on a trade mission to South Africa and Botswana. The women represented a range of industries and experience, from trade mission veteran to new exporter. But all went to Africa with the goal of making the most of their mission — and making sales in new markets.

Trade missions are an investment, both of time and money. But Robinson and others who've been there say that the payoffs — new sales and solid contacts in international markets — are worth it. Let Robinson and her delegation members share with you what they learned in Africa.

■ TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Ilene Robinson is the president of Security Options, a small Detroit company that sells a variety of products that provide physical security for office equipment. For someone in the security businesses, Robinson certainly isn't

the cautious type. Having never exported before, she jumped in feet-first with a ten-day trade mission. Why?

For Robinson, as for many U.S. entrepreneurs, it was interest in a particular market (South Africa, in this case) that led her to consider exporting. During a trip to South Africa last fall with a charitable organization, she noticed that there weren't many quality security products available, and began thinking that her niche product could well meet South African needs. "They stop where I start," notes Robinson. She visited the U.S. Commercial Service office at the embassy in Johannesburg

and was encouraged by the market intelligence she received — and impressed by the professionalism of the staff. It was this experience that convinced her to go back to South Africa just a few months later.

Nancy Bacon has a very different story. The Senior Vice President of Energy Conversion Devices, Bacon is a trade mission veteran. Energy Conversion Devices is a high technology Michigan-based company that develops energy generation and storage products, including technology that directly converts sunlight to electricity. With millions of people in Southern Africa



Ilene Robinson presents her products to a group of business women in Capetown, South Africa

Photo courtesy of U.S. Commercial Service

living away from the electrical grid, Bacon says her products mean the difference between light and darkness. "Our products can really change people's lives," she says.

A CPA by training, Bacon is an old hand at exporting. She has taken part in many trade missions, including some led by secretaries of Energy and Commerce. She describes the mission Cino led as "a real working mission."

Robinson agrees. "The trade mission was more than I expected," says Robinson. "The prospects I met with were very good." And now that she's back in her office in Detroit? "My challenge now is to complete the deals," she says. "Some of the contacts I met with in Africa are already in touch with the Commercial Service there, saying that they're ready to move forward with me. It's all happening very quickly."

Trade missions can generate fast results, as Robinson discovered. Delegation member Patricia Schneider had a similar experience. Schneider is the President and CEO of Global MED-NET International, an emergency medical information storage and forwarding service. She went to Africa to find quality distributors in the emerging healthcare sectors of South Africa and Botswana.

"We left Africa with five qualified partner proposals as a direct result from our trade mission meetings," she says. "Normally, it would have taken us several months to find these potential partners."

ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS

When asked if they would go on another trade mission, Schneider, Bacon, and Robinson all say yes. What advice do they have for a businesswoman going on her first (or fifth) trade mission?

- Don't neglect pre-mission planning. Bacon advises other trade mission



Photo courtesy of U.S. Commercial Service

The trade delegation arrives in Durban, South Africa on its third stop of the mission.

participants to work closely with mission organizers in advance of the trip. She tells the organizers exactly who she wants to meet with — which means she's always pleased with the schedule that's arranged for her.

- Familiarize yourself with the culture and business practices of the countries you will visit. Even something as simple as the local dress code can be a surprise if you're not prepared. Robinson says she expected to see more formal suits during her meetings with South African business people.
- Bring plenty of business cards — even more than you think you'll need. "By the end of the trip, we all ran out," recalls Robinson.
- Get to know your fellow mission delegates. Not only will you make contacts in the markets you're visiting, you can make fantastic contacts with the women you're traveling with. For Robinson, the neophyte of the group, having guidance from more experienced mission participants like Bacon may turn out to be a boon.
- Take good notes after your meetings. No matter how sharp your memory, day after day of meetings can run together. Robinson

suggests using travel time to jot down your thoughts.

- Get a business card scanner, if you don't already have one. Robinson estimates that in less than ten days, she collected well over 100 business cards.
- Don't rely solely on overseas personnel. Bacon recommends working not only with overseas personnel, but also the Commercial Service specialists in local U.S. Export Assistance Centers. "That's what made this mission such a success for me," she reports.
- Lastly, budget time for follow up — "it's absolutely critical," says Bacon.

Says Maria Cino, who led the trade mission, "trade missions are a great way to find quality buyers, partners, and agents in international markets." Schneider of Global Med-Net International agrees, calling her mission "a low-cost, high-return avenue" to new business. To maximize returns from a trade mission, Cino says, "pick your markets carefully, do your homework and work with mission organizers." Comfortable shoes and plenty of business cards won't hurt either. ■